



Spring Break is Prime Time for “Grandparents Scam”

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MADISON – Spring break is underway, and many students from around Wisconsin have headed to the beach – either here in the States or abroad. While these students are soaking up the sun, scammers could be using their absence as a way to take advantage of Grandma and Grandpa back in Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is asking families to be on the lookout for “Grandparents Scams” during spring break. These scams take on a number of forms, but always involve a request for cash tied to a story about a hardship a grandchild is facing. The scammer, posing as the grandchild, will call asking for money to pay for tuition or textbooks, fix a car, get out of jail or leave a foreign country. The grandparent is asked not to tell anyone else about the situation.

“This scam is as low as they come,” said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. “These criminals take advantage of a grandparent’s love and concern and the trust they have established with their grandchildren.”

“According to the Federal Trade Commission, reports of imposter scams were up 22 percent in 2011,” Chalmers added. “Since most grandparents would not hesitate to help out their grandchildren, these scams are lucrative for criminals and often net thousands of dollars at a time.”

With many college students using Facebook to share updates and future plans with friends and family members, it is not difficult for a scammer to seek out a student planning a vacation, learn about their plans, follow their travel, and study up on the student’s family members and personal details. When a scammer calls the grandparent, he is likely to be able to spin a convincing story. To further sell the scam, a second person may also call the grandparent, claiming to be a police officer or a bondsman.

The Bureau of Consumer Protection offers these tips for handling a potentially fraudulent call for help:

- No matter how dramatic the story sounds, do not wire money. The chances of recovery are slim to none. Also, do not send a check or money order by overnight delivery or courier. Con artists recommend these services so they can get your money before you realize you have been cheated.
- Never provide your bank or credit card account numbers – regardless of the reason.
- Resist the pressure to act immediately. Try to contact the grandchild at a number that you know is accurate such as a home or cell phone number before transferring money. If you do not have your grandchild’s phone numbers, get in touch with their parent, spouse or another close family member to check out the story before you send any money – even if you have been asked to keep the call a secret.
- Remember that some impostors research the people they are posing as and can answer basic questions about them. Try to verify the caller’s identity by asking personal questions a stranger could not answer.
- Do not fill in the blanks. Refrain from mentioning other family members’ names or personal information. If the caller says, “It’s your granddaughter,” respond with “Which one?” Most likely, the caller will hang up.

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- If you cannot reach a family member and still are not sure what to do, call the Bureau of Consumer Protection or your local police on the non-emergency line. They can help you sort things out.
- If you receive repeated fraudulent calls, contact your local telephone company for assistance and file a complaint with the police immediately.

“If you receive a call for financial help while a family member is on travel, it may be difficult to fight an urge to react immediately,” noted Chalmers. “Collect your thoughts, be skeptical of the situation and take appropriate steps to verify the call.”

For more information about grandparent scams or other fraudulent activities targeting elderly populations, visit the Consumer Protection website at datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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